

Wirtland, ca. 1850

Built for Dr. William Wirt, Jr., in 1850, Wirtland is considered to be one of Virginia's outstanding examples of Gothic Revival domestic architecture, while its romantically landscaped park is a rare survival of Victorian landscaping.

Dr. Wirt was the son of William Wirt, a noted jurist, statesman, and biographer of Patrick Henry. Dr. Wirt was living in Baltimore in 1845 when he married Elizabeth Payne, the daughter of Daniel Payne of Bleak Hall in Westmoreland County, Virginia. The couple then relocated to Westmoreland so that Wirt could manage his wife's landholdings. Rather than settling on her family property, he purchased the estate of James C. Jett, where he built a fanciful mansion in the then fashionable Gothic Revival style. Wirt described in letters to his mother that he had personally superintended the house construction and layout of the gardens, and that he and Elizabeth planned to move into "Wirtland" at the end of August 1850.

Wirtland exemplified the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of an American villa popularized by architect Andrew Jackson Downing. In Downing's view, a villa was "the most refined home of America," where "amid the serenity and peace of sylvan scenes...the artistic knowledge and feeling has full play." A sophisticated house such as Wirtland typically was custom-designed, but no architect has been associated with it. Most likely, the design was based on published illustrations.

For a number of years after Wirt's death in 1898, his son William Dabney Wirt and his wife operated a female boarding school known as Wirtland Seminary at the property. Later owners Mr. and Mrs. Burton Slocum undertook extensive repairs to the house. Since 1967, the property has been owned by Ingleside Plantation Nurseries, Inc., and has served as a private residence for the Flemer family.

Wirtland was listed in the Virginia Landmarks Register in 1976 and the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.